Approaches to Death in the West

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A death blow is a life blow to some
Who, till they died, did not alive become
Who, had they lived, had died, but when
They died, vitality begun.

Emily Dickinson
1830－1866

Death inevitably touches us all. Children realize they are mortal by the time they reach eight or nine years of age. Our present life expectancy may double in years to come because of rapid progress in hygiene and medical science, but we know full well that the most we can hope for is to postpone the fateful moment－our mortal condition remains unchanged.[1] There is nothing we can do; no good deeds will excuse their doers from the sentence of death; the good die just as surely as the bad. Those who put a high value on control of their own existence are especially offended by the thought that they, too, are subject to the forces of death.[2]

It is true that when we read about death in a book or discuss it philosophically in conversation, the reality of death does not touch us at the core of our being. "Only when it is 'my' imminent death or the imminent death of someone

1 Ignace Lepp, *Death and Its Mysteries* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p.127－28.

2 Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p.5.

I love do I feel the pangs of 'life-hunger.'"[3] In such a state many of us find our soul in torment, frantically clutching life, because we have not grown to respond peacefully to the real possibility of our own imminent death. Instead of accepting its reality, we find the fact such a shock that our ready response is one of denial. Thomas Bell, the author of *In the Midst of Life,* an autobiographical account of his struggle with his own terminal situation, wrote:

> Now and then the whole thing becomes unreal. Out of the night's darkness, or bringing me to a sudden, chilling halt during the day, the thought comes: This can't be happening to me. Me with a malignant tumor? Me with only a few months to live? Nonsense. And I stare up at the darkness, or out at the sunlit street, and try to feel it. But it stays unreal.
>
> Perhaps the difficulty is my half-conscious presumption that such things happen, should happen, only to other people... People who are strangers, who really don't mind, who... are born solely to fill such quotas. Whereas I am me. Not a stranger. Not other people. Me![4]

He has been told nothing fundamentally new because he has always known that some day he would die; but before,

> the idea of his death was always something just beyond the horizon of his consciousness and his planning—even while he may have been discussing various alternative programs with his life insurance agent.[5]

What is his response? At first he feels like going to pieces; but that changes none of the facts, and he will realize that soon enough. He is forced to decide

3 Ibid., p.148.

4 Kubler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth,* p.148.

5 Peter Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy* (Westport, Conn.: William House-Regency, Inc., 1972), p.24.

what is important and what is not. Knowledge of his own death compels him to face the question of the ultimate meaning of life, and to face it immediately. Most persons realize the importance of the question of the meaning of life but tend to postpone coming firmly to grips with it; we still think death happens to others. When we fully realize the truth about death (i.e., its immanence), we are forced to be brutally honest with ourselves.[6]

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her well-known book, *On Death and Dying*, documents six stages of responses that a terminally ill person goes through in dealing with his death: denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The last stage, acceptance, is a liberating response. The person has finally stopped clinging to his life and to pseudo goals like status, money, and sex and is capable of experiencing life in a new dimension.

This act of acceptance, this liberation, is the culmination of a death process. The individual, through the act of accepting what he has no power to resist, and by renouncing his own will to resist it to the bitter end, actually goes through a death. This death is often termed 'the first death,' inasmuch as it is the dying we do before the death of our mortal bodies. It is the death brought on by renunciation, by the very act of dying to ourselves. It is through this symbolic death that the experience or rebirth takes place, a phenomenon observed for thousands of years by religious thinkers and philosophers and now by depth psychologists. By detaching ourselves, in so far as it is possible, from the world we usually cling to, we come to experience the world anew, in a more meaningful and vital way. Many never experience this first death; some do so just prior to their mortal death. But if the reality of death when fully accepted produces such a valuable catharsis, why do so many individuals in our culture wait until they are on their deathbed to have such a liberating experience?

In her book, *Death: the Final Stage of Growth*, Kubler-Ross states that the

6 Ibid.

highest spiritual values of life can originate from the thought and study of death.[7] Death does not have to be a catastrophic and destructive thing; "indeed, it can be viewed as one of the most constructive, positive and creative elements of culture and life."[8]

> The aim of all philosophers has been to elucidate the meaning of death, thus helping human beings to overcome their fears. Socrates, Plato and Montaigne have taught that to philosophize means nothing more than to study the problem of death. And Schopenhauer called death the "truly inspiring genius of philosophy."
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> "No thought exists in me which death has not carved with his chisel," said Michelangelo. From Egyptian Etruscan, and Attic beginning of art to modern surrealism, death has played an important part.
>
> Death is, however, not only the inspirer of artistic imagination. It has strongly influenced the ethical attitude of human beings as well. Death was the great instructor of those noble characters in history whom we venerate as heroes, saints, or martyrs of science.[9]

Death, then, is not only something that happens to us, it is also an act, something we do. This point is expressed below in the theology of Karl Rahner:

> Death as act, has more to do with the presence of death throughout life than with the final moment which is really the end of death, the death of death... Because death is continuously present through the whole of human life, biologically and in the concrete experience of each individual person, death is also an act of human freedom. But the mere presence of

7 Kubler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, p.1.
8 Ibid.
9 Kubler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, p.1.

> death through life does not make death a free act. What must be seen is that man has to die his death in freedom. He cannot avoid this death imposed on him as the task of his freedom. How he dies it, however, how he understands this death, depends on his free decision. His freedom lies not in the whether but in the how.[10]

"Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly, or heartily an altogether?"[11] Given the strong survival instinct of human beings, the process of dying is no easy task. This is demonstrated by the response of terminally ill patients. Dying is a movement into the unknown where often our faith experience loses bearings and plunges us into darkness. How many of us have learned to deal with our fears of that darkness?

> The 'coming to terms' with the inevitable cessation of life presents itself traditionally as the problem of conquering the fear of death. That is the perennial companion of man, be he poet, scientist, or philosopher, from Anacienon's 'death is too terrible... rightening are the depths of Hades...' to the English writer William Sherlock who, in his *A Practical Discourse Concerning Death* (1689), writes that "death is commonly and very truly called the king of terrors...' And in the *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* we read in the article on death that 'the horror of death is universal among mankind.[12]

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10 Michael Taylor, *The Mystery of Suffering and Death* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1974), p.151－52.

11 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1961), p.49.

12 Nathan Scott, *The Modern Vision of Death* (Richmond, Virginia: John Know Press, 1967), p.70.

Our fear of death occurs, however, in different degrees. We are aware that death is continually all around us throughout our lives. As a child we may have experienced the funeral of an elderly relative or perhaps have read about tragic accidents in the news, but why is it that we are not disturbed by these deaths as much as by the fact of our own pending death? The reason is that when we witness the "death of others" we acknowledge it merely as an occurrence within the world. The world is still going on. "The death of others—as seen from the perspective of my own subjective and inwardness—is usually not accompanied by any overwhelming invasion of anxiety, dread, and nausea... It involves the elimination of an object within the world, and not of the observing ego or subject."[13] But my own death—"the death of myself" produces a greater fear because it is the threat of non-being.

In protecting ourselves from the tremendous and dangerous amount of anxiety that is released when we are confronted with the phenomenologically accurate recognition of the meaning of our own death we tend to think that death means only the death of another.[14] But such ambiguity is an escape from the unaltered facts of human existence, i.e., we die, and the world we know comes to an end.

> This of course, is the kind of analysis existentialists have engaged to discover the real meaning of death in the life of man. In analyzing our own death, we must examine more than merely the physical disintegration and dissolution of our personal world. The death of myself is well described phenomenologically by the terms "void" or "encounter with nothingness."[15]

A distinction should be made here between "a real possibility of one's life

13 Peter Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death: Essays in Existential Psychology and Philosophy* (Westerport, Conn.: William House-Regency, Inc.,1972), p.5.

14 Ibid., p.9.

15 Ibid., p.6.

coming to an end—the fear of death 'in the face of death'—and the occasions when one thinks about this possibility or about the inevitability of death in general—in short, the fear of death 'in anticipation of death.'"[16]

> Death, when we are immediately confronted with that threat, presents itself in terms of extraordinary and unspeakable anxiety. Such a terrifying confrontation immobilizes our normal responses and, what is most important, transforms the value of everything in life. Prior to the confrontation with the threat of one's own death, such things as having a greener lawn than my neighbors, a better grade in school than my friends, a higher income than my associates, and the like, loomed large and important; yet in the face of the ultimate threat, their value is totally transformed.[17]

Another distinction to be made is that some people do not fear death, rather they fear dying. Obviously, both of these fears can and often do coexist. It is interesting, however, that the latter is much more frequent than is usually assumed. Thus Philippus Paracelsus, the great Swiss physician of the sixteenth century, said that "not death is the torture, but torture is where death begins. Some observers believe that fear of death (as fear of not being alive anymore) is typical of young people, whereas old people are not worried about not existing, but are afraid of the last struggle."[18] Of course, the other side of the coin is demonstrated in cases like that of Goethe's mother who "excused herself from attending a tea party by sending a note saying that she was 'too busy dying.'"[19]

Generally people in western culture fear both death and the process of dying, because they place such a great value on their individual lives and their continual existence. Western man, in the words of Aldous Huxley, is "obsessed with

16 Scott, *The Modern Vision of Death*, p.70.
17 Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death*, p,6.
18 Scott, *The Modern Vision of Death*, p.76.
19 Ibid., p.87.

survival." This attitude is expressed in Dylan Thomas' passionate exhortation addressed to his dying father:

> Do not go gentle into that good night...
> Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.

Why have we not developed an attitude of readiness and acceptance such as that illustrated by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in Gatanjali?

> On the day when death will knock at thy door
> What will thou offer him?
> Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my life,
> I will never let him go with empty hand...
> A summons has come and I am ready for my journey.[20]

How many of us raised in modern western culture are ready for that journey? Our immediate response is one of denial and we repress the thought of our own death by projecting it into external realities (movies, novels, newspaper, etc.). We also feel the attraction to flirt with death in war or daring acts—to prove that death cannot assail us. Only after the anxiety of death has been faced and our ego is no longer struggling for survival do we find ourselves integrated into a greater being, be it nature, God, or the beauty of death itself. This leads to courage and integrity—one feels his existence and achieves some of his greatest glories—in art, religion, and self-assertion.

The anxiety persons experience at the thought of their inevitable death can be paralyzing. On the other hand, Rollo May states that normal anxiety associated with death does not necessarily imply depression or melancholy but like

20 Scott, *The Modern Vision of Death*, p.88.

any normal anxiety can be used constructively. When we realize that in death we will be separated from others the anxiety produced by this thought can be a motivation for achieving closer bonds to other human beings now. Likewise, the anxiety in knowing that our activity and creativity will eventually be cut off can more us to be more responsible and zestful during the period that we have left. As a person approaches death he often realizes the amount of mundane activity that made up his life.

Except for the surviving monastic communities in the West, which today have little if no influence on society, western culture does not offer a structure in which individuals are trained to deal with the anxiety created by the recognition of their own mortality. The Church deals with the topic of death but lay persons are not encouraged to confront it as monks and nuns are. To experience this anxiety takes more than a hour of church on Sunday or merely involvement in theological studies. We must enter the death experience totally. Some individuals today attempt to deal with their fear of death through therapy; others have witnessed the horror of war first hand and have been transformed as a result.

Witnessing a fatal accident may also grip one with fear and cause a person to reevaluate, at least temporarily, his or her entire mode of life. Seeing an accident creates far more anxiety than reading about it. An accident, by the unique combination of fascination and terror, becomes a symbol or reminder of the fundamental paradox of humans. For those few moments our identification with the victim is so close that we are reminded of that overwhelming presence of the phenomenological condition we have termed the "death of myself." This experience shakes the stability of our world and makes us realize in that unpleasant space in time that the world in which we live, with its goals, prejudices, and institutions, is not the solid existence that we had believed and hoped.

The positive side of this dreadful disruption of equilibrium is that we are lead to reevaluate and further the process of transforming the meaning of our individual human existence. The accident produces an urgency in us to find a meaningful existence.

> The morbid fascination that the average person sees in an accident is merely a clue—as are many other events in our human existence—to a crucial element in human nature. That element is the inescapability of death, with its negative and positive impact on our life. The enormous anxiety generated by the full understanding of the meaning of the death of myself leads, like a catharsis, to the determination and eventual acquisition of a meaningful life.[21]

The anxiety produced by the fear of our death or of the process of dying is in fact an experience of awakening. Kierkegaard declared that this anxiety appears as "an expression of the perfection of human nature" and "whoever has learned to be truly anxious, has learned the highest."[22]

If we were not aware that death was part of our existence there would be no anxiety. As with many life forms, when their time comes to die they simply die. But this is not the case for human beings. We experience the death of our fellow man and see that no one escapes its call; thus we conclude that we too will follow in line. When my grandmother died at the ripe old age of ninety-seven I remember my father saying after the funeral that what was disturbing about his mother's death was the awareness that his generation was next in line to go.

This pessimistic attitude has its roots in the Renaissance of the sixteenth and

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21 Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death*, p.11.

22 Jacques Choran, *Death and the Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1963), p.225.

seventeenth centuries which on the one hand offered a new optimism of life with a drive toward self-fulfillment and self-realization, but on the other hand called into question Christianity's optimism regarding life after death. As the Renaissance developed more and more people agreed that using reason seemed more reasonable than faith when thinking about the aftermath of death. As the empirical method of reason developed, the notion of immortality appeared improbable. Michel de Montaigne (1533－1592) gave an answer to death that has been the most frequent alternative to the Christian answer. He concluded that the nature of death is not a principal issue because death is seen as it appears to "common sense"－total annihilation.[23]

Despite Cante's insistence that disbelief in an afterlife was the most foolish, vilest, and most dangerous position,[24] the hope of any existence after this life has diminished in the West as the acceptance of existential philosophy has increased. Christianity, with its doctrine of judgment and eternal life has become a minority in many areas of the once Christian West.

Death for many today is simply the end: extinction! Apparently no one needs to be anxious concerning the last judgment, a heaven or hell. Yet there is still anxiety because humans fear the end of life, separation from loved ones, familiar surroundings, and to some, worst of all, the thought of not continuing involvement in history. Because death is certain and inevitable, many thinkers have seriously questioned the meaning of life and see it as merely an absurd agitation.

> When Martin Heidegger, for example, defines man as a being toward death (*Sein zum Tode*), he is not content to affirm a mere biological fact but insists upon the absolute vanity of everything we do. When Albert Camus says in *The Stranger*, "Destiny condemns us all," he shares a similar vision.

23 Ibid., p.97.
24 Ibid., p.96.

> In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he is even more explicit: "Because of death," he writes, "human existence has no meaning. All the crimes that men could commit are nothing in comparison with that fundamental crime which is death."[25]

Friederich Nietzsche attributed this fundamental crime to God the Creator. Andre Malraux observes that in the name of man's dignity and freedom, the West began by killing God, and then discovered himself condemned to death. We read in *The Temptation of the West* that "after having destroyed God and in order to destroy him, the European spirit has annihilated everything which could oppose man. At the end of its efforts it found nothing but death."[26]

Heidegger's work has been a powerful influence on contemporary philosophy and literature. Since *Sein und Zeit*, death has become one of the centers of philosophical inquiry in Western society. "The exceptional success—one could almost say, the popular vogue—of Heidegger's investigations illustrates the modern individual's yearning for an existential understanding of death."[27] Seeing death as the "ultimate coronation of the nothingness" that constitutes our being, he advises that the only intelligent thing to do is to "confront courageously the sad reality of our nothingness."[28] Not all existentialists, however, would agree with Heidegger's stoic acceptance of his sad fate. Agreeing with him that life and death have no meaning in themselves, some still would be inclined to modify Heidegger's pessimism by personally bestowing meaning on life. Camus rebels against death by not submitting to an absurd destiny and thus becoming

25 Lepp, *Death and Its Mysteries*, p.128.
26 Ibid., p.129.
27 F. Reynolds, *Religious Encounters with Death: insights from the history and anthropology of religions*, ed. E. Waugh (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p.21.
28 Lepp, *Death and Its Mysteries*, p.132.

its accomplice. "Men do not deserve to suffer and die," he wrote. Camus' ambition is to live without illusions and then die without regret, all the time taking pains to "die well."[29]

The German-American theologian, Paul Tillich, describes anxiety as man's reaction to the threat of non-being. The fight brought upon man is the self-conscious awareness that at any moment he might cease to exist; in our present age, this angst undermines all of society with the threat of a nuclear holocaust. Furthermore, "non-being" does not only mean the threat of physical death but pervades the psychological and spiritual realms as the threat of "meaninglessness in one's existence." Even in this despairing thought Tillich is an optimist and challenges the individual to stand against the threat of non-being and strengthen his feeling of being a self, "a strengthening of his perception of himself as distinct from the world of non-being, of objects."[30]

Those who have found no meaning in their lives cannot give meaning to their death. It is often said that people die as they live. This seems contrary to the laws of rational logic. Would not those who live most intensely and love most passionately most fear death? "On the other hand, all those who find life a painful burden, who are tired and discouraged, it seems they would welcome death as a deliverance from their miseries. Psychologists find this not to be the case."[31]

It is also not the case that Christians overcome this anxiety by virtue of their faith.

> There are believers who are terrified of death and unbelievers who ignore it. It is an error to think that faith delivers us from the anxiety of death or that the latter is the origin of religious faith. It is rather love of life that de-

29 Ibid.

30 Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1950), p.17.

31 Lepp, *Death and Its Mysteries*, p.38.

> livers us from anxiety of death, and this love is found in believers and unbelievers alike.[32]

Modern psychotherapy is involved with helping individuals give meaning to their own lives. This was the proposed task of the celebrated Viennese psychotherapist, Victor Frankle. This understanding of reality insists on the fact that, contrary to what many believe, the meaning of life is not something that exists prior to its discovery.[33] It is important to recall Frankle's life in one of Hitler's concentration camps, an experience that stripped away every possible vestige of the world that he had known. With his life reduced to utter destitution Frankle still gave meaning to his own life and found it worthy to survive.

"According to Pascal, man, unable to cure death, hit upon the idea of not thinking about it in order to be happy. They 'distract themselves'...they delegate the idea of death to the unconscious. There it generally causes much harm and engenders an incomprehensible anxiety."[34] Pascal's intuition has been confirmed by depth psychology. "The frantic pursuit of pleasure—sensual as well as aesthetic and intellectual—is for many people an unconscious flight from their anxiety about death."[35] Cicero wrote: "The life of a philosopher is a perpetual meditation on death... To philosophize is to learn how to die." Ignace Lepp, both a priest and psychotherapist, explains what purpose meditation on death might have.

> Meditation can only be recommended if it helps us transfigure death and give it positive meaning. Constant meditation on death is paralyzing for both action and life. On the other hand, nothing is accomplished by repressing the thought of death or trying to drown it in a sea of distractions.

32 Ibid., p.40.
33 Ibid., p.136.
34 Ibid., p.130.
35 Ibid.

> It is much better to confront the reality directly and openly admit that death is both an intellectual and emotional scandal. Only after we have done this will it be possible for us to sublimate it.[36]

An authentic solution is to live with the paradox between transcendence and death. It does not appear we transcend mortal death and yet we cannot accept death for what it appears to be. How a person lives with the tension of being and non-being, infinity and finitude, determines how he will respond to the multifarious smaller problems he encounters. "To define humanity without these existential paradoxes, is in effect, a logical contradiction."[37] Peter Koestenbaum describes how the "in authentic" and the "authentic" deal with this situation.

> The in authentic man represses the urgency of the paradox and desperately engages in activities that presume to serve as soothing anodynes, escapes, avoidance, and defenses...He avoids thinking about the problem of the meaning of life and he resists insights about the paradox of human existence. He represses the anxiety that is one of the fundamental clues to his being.[38]

> The authentic man understands anxiety. He looks upon anxiety as a friend, as a ray of light that promises to illuminate his basic nature. When anxiety strikes, he allows it to develop; he follows it to its end. Unless the paradox is brought to the light of day—life cannot have genuine meaning.[39]

Koestenbaum sets down four authentic solutions discovered in the history of

36 Ibid., p.131.
37 Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death*, p.108.
38 Ibid., p.110.
39 Ibid., p.109.

ideas. First, one can decide to face the paradox of his existence by rebelling against his nature and his fate. Secondly, he might also try commitment and infuse meaning into his life by actively committing himself to an ideal or a way of life. Courage and a stiff upper lip are necessary, as well as a narrow vision, lest conflicting ideals issue tantalizing calls as dangerous to his equilibrium as the calls of mermaids to sailors.[40]

The other two solutions are often put in religious language. The third solution is that of acceptance and resignation. Not knowing why there are such paradoxes in life, the individual refuses to rebel but rather holds a deep and abiding faith that this situation is for the best. He cheerfully accepts his finitude and finds fulfillment in the will of God. Lastly, there is the solution of mysticism. The individual takes a stand through faith and experience that life is not just what it appears to be in common sense, but that death and anxiety may just be the way to union and peace with God.[41] This solution is expressed below by an anonymous Syrian monk, a Christian neoplatonist of the fifth or early sixth century, in a theological treatises titled *Mystica Theologia.*

> Do thou, then, in the intent practice of mystic contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things which are not and things which are, and strain upwards in unknowing, as far as may be, towards the union with Him who is above all things and knowledge. For by unceasing and absolute withdrawal from thyself and all things in purity, abandoning all and set free from all, thou shalt be borne up to the ray of divine darkness that surpasseth all being.[42]

40 Ibid., p.110.

41 Ibid., p.165.

42 William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1978), p.17.